

VZCZCXRO0091
OO RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0008/01 0040932
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 040932Z JAN 10
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7183
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5896
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0241
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0842
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 0349
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 0870
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0796
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 1003
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0151
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI PRIORITY 0265
RUEHFT/AMCONSUL FRANKFURT PRIORITY 2478
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 0442
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0781

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 06 DAMASCUS 000008

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, ELA
NSC FOR SHAPIRO/MCDERMOTT
PARIS FOR NOBLES
LONDON FOR LORD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/03/2029

TAGS: [PREL](#) [IR](#) [LE](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: CODEL GREGG'S DECEMBER 30 MEETING WITH PRESIDENT
ASAD

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (S) Summary: In a frank one-hour meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, Senators Gregg, Bayh, Specter, Enzi, Cornyn, and Klobuchar affirmed Washington's interest in better U.S.-Syrian relations and pushed Asad to take positive steps as well. The senators urged Syria to move forward on security cooperation with the U.S. on Iraq, facilitating the release of three detained Americans in Iran, and re-opening the Damascus Community School. Asad welcomed the prospect of more Congressional visits and candid exchanges, saying diplomacy had failed to solve the region's problems during the last two decades.

-- On comprehensive peace, Asad reiterated Syria's strong desire to return to Turkish-facilitated indirect talks with Israel as a means to establish agreed terms of reference for direct negotiations. Syria's relations with Iran should not be linked to Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations. Syria's ties to Hamas, Hizballah, and other groups could be satisfactorily resolved only after the achievement of a comprehensive regional peace, Asad maintained.

-- The U.S. and Syria should use the next several months to improve bilateral relations so that both sides could overcome mutual distrust that would hinder U.S. credibility as an honest broker, Asad told the senators. Later in the discussion, FM Muallim argued the onus for taking the next positive step lay with the U.S. Syria could not move on issues such as the American school or the Cultural Center unless Washington lifted its ban on the sale of new commercial aircraft to Syria.

-- Calling Iran the region's most important country, Asad said the West could improve the prospects for peace by acknowledging Iran's NPT-protected right to enrich uranium under IAEA monitoring. Asad argued the West should accept Iran's "reasonable" counter-offer to ship several batches of low-enriched uranium (LEU) abroad for enrichment by other

countries, instead of insisting Iran ship all of its LEU at once. Asad said he believed Iran was not interested in pursuing a nuclear weapon, but warned that an Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure would fail to disable the program and would only increase Iran's determination. End Summary.

Doctor Asad: Treat, Don't Condemn, the Illness

¶2. (S) A confident President Asad greeted the six visiting senators and accompanying staff of CODEL Gregg on December 30 with a call for frank discussion of "the facts" rather than an exchange of opinions. Only the facts, he said, would enable both sides to focus on the critical issues of common interest and lead to a process of identifying solutions to shared challenges. The international community had failed for two decades to solve the region's problems. Now, there were new challenges on top of these that required direct, not diplomatic, solutions. He welcomed the delegation, saying he hoped for more meetings with Congressional groups.

¶3. (S) Senator Specter expressed the delegation's condolences after the death of the President's younger brother Majd and recalled his numerous meetings with President Asad since their first meeting in 2000 at the funeral of former Syrian President Hafez al-Asad. Senator Specter referred to his earlier discussions with Syrian officials about Israeli-Syrian peace talks and suggested

DAMASCUS 00000008 002 OF 006

Israel would benefit from peace with Syria. The U.S. recognized Syria's deep and long-standing ties to Iran, but it also saw dangers if Iran acquired nuclear weapons. Stipulating that the Israeli government would have to make its own decisions on how to proceed in peace talks with Syria without U.S. pressure, Specter suggested the U.S. would positively view Syrian efforts to use its influence to alter Iranian policies. Iranian policies currently opposed the achievement of peace between Syria and Israel, even as Syria recognized such a development would have a positive impact on defusing other regional tensions.

¶4. (S) Asad asserted he wanted peace with Israel, but the issues were complex and required an organized frame of reference. Both sides might agree on the shared objective of peace, but they differed on preferred approaches. Calling for a fact-based approach to identifying the obstacles to peace, Asad likened the process to how a doctor should treat cancer. Condemnations and mutual recriminations might be self-satisfying, but the cancer still grows unless the doctor is able to treat the root illness. Syria, Asad continued, had begun indirect peace talks with Israel in May 2008 under Turkish auspices. In roughly eight months, these talks had achieved more than several years of direct negotiations with Israel in the 1990s. The U.S. and Europeans needed to support the Turkish track, argued Asad. They also should convince Israel that only peace will protect Israel. Israel's military superiority would not secure it from attack against missiles and other technologies. President Obama's tenure might represent the last opportunity for peace, Asad told the senators.

Asad on Necessity of Indirect Peace Talks

¶5. (S) Senator Gregg asked why Syria insisted on pursuing indirect peace talks via the Turks. Why couldn't Syria and Israel move to direct talks brokered by the U.S., while Syria helped on issues important to the U.S., such as Hizballah, Hamas, and relations with Iran? Asad replied Hamas and Hizballah should be a part of the peace, but not organizing principles for conducting peace discussions. Syria, as demonstrated by then-lead negotiator Muallim's efforts in the

1990s, had no problems with direct negotiations. But those negotiations failed; failing again might foreclose future opportunities. U.S. ambitions to push the peace process forward only resulted in spoiling the process because of the lack of "rules of negotiation." Indirect talks represent the best way to establish terms of reference similar to those reached by Secretary Baker during his intense shuttle diplomacy in 1991. While no one called these talks indirect negotiations, they functioned comparably to Syria's indirect talks under Turkish auspices.

16. (S) Syria, Asad continued, saw the indirect talks as a way to institutionalize the process and reach agreed terms of reference on which to base direct negotiations. This basis was absent in the 1990s and explained why the direct negotiations ultimately failed. Referring to the "elephant in the room," Gregg asked whether it would be possible to reach peace with Israel without first resolving the Iranian nuclear issue. Asad cautioned against linking Iran's nuclear program to an Israeli-Syrian peace deal, arguing such a link would only complicate both sets of issues. "Too many cooks spoil the meal," he said. Later in the conversation, however (in the context of a request for Syrian intervention with Iran to free detained American hikers), Asad noted every person and nation was key in bilateral and regional dynamics.

DAMASCUS 00000008 003 OF 006

Syria had cut relations with the U.S. after the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict, but bilateral relations had improved markedly after President Nixon visited Syria in 1974 to discuss peace with Israel. "That's our issue," he stressed, noting that the Golan track had been active under President Carter but then dormant through most of the 1980s and the early part of the current decade.

Iraq: Political Cooperation, Then Security Cooperation

17. (S) Senator Bayh observed that many things in Syria had changed for the better since his 2002 visit. Now, there were positive indicators that bilateral relations might be on the upswing as well. One area, however, in which relations had not improved was intelligence cooperation. The U.S. and Syria appeared to have common interests in seeing a stable Iraq, not dominated by Iran. Yet, foreign extremists continued to travel through Syria into Iraq. The U.S. had provided information regarding four named individuals to the Syrian government, but nothing had happened. Perhaps now was a propitious moment to consider re-establishing intelligence ties, Bayh suggested. Asad concurred with the idea of overlapping U.S.-Syrian interests in Iraq. He noted, however, that the main obstacle to increased U.S.-Syrian security cooperation stemmed from the absence of political cooperation. The U.S. possessed a "huge information apparatus" but lacked the ability to analyze this information successfully, maintained Asad. "You're failing in the fight against extremism. While we lack your intelligence capabilities, we succeed in fighting extremists because we have better analysts," he claimed, attributing the superior analysis to living in and understanding the region.

18. (S) Syria, Asad explained, had refused to cooperate with President Bush because it did not trust him and because the Bush Administration had wrongfully accused Syria of supporting foreign fighters. When President Obama assumed office, Syria tried to be positive. Asad he had proposed to Special Envoy Mitchell the idea of a border security cooperation initiative with Iraq as a first step. (Post Comment: Asad's recollection is both selective and inaccurate. U.S. officials first proposed a border security cooperation initiative to a reluctant FM Muallim in May 2009. President Asad agreed to participate after meeting S/E Mitchell in late July 2009.) "This was a small step for me, but big for you," Asad argued. Citing the U.S. inability to control its long border with Mexico, Asad said the border was

not the major challenge. Syria's close intelligence cooperation with Turkey enabled both countries to prevent terrorists from crossing their 860-kilometer border without relying on a huge border security presence. This intelligence cooperation enabled Syria to "suffocate" logistical networks critical to the movement of terrorists. "In the U.S., you like to shoot (terrorists). Suffocating their networks is far more effective," said Asad.

¶9. (S) Asad said Syria required a positive first step prior to resuming intelligence cooperation, a position that Senator Mitchell had accepted. Syria had succeeded in convincing Iraqi PM Maliki on August 18 to reverse its opposition to the trilateral border security initiative and was ready to participate. After the August 19 bombings and Iraqi accusations against Syria for facilitating the terrorist attacks, Syria remained willing to participate in the border assessments. It was the U.S., Asad insisted, that had backed away. Syria had no interest in supporting extremists, who weren't killing Americans but rather Iraqi civilians. "That

DAMASCUS 00000008 004 OF 006

hurts us," Asad claimed. U.S. "mistakes in Iraq" had cost Syria and the region a great deal. Syria had out of self-interest sought to deter terrorists who popped up. Still, despite a shared interest with the U.S. in ensuring Iraqi stability, Syria would not immediately jump to intelligence cooperation without ensuring its own interests would be respected. "I won't give it (intelligence cooperation) to you for free," he said. Senator Bayh replied that the U.S. was working to normalize relations and considering positive steps to take along the way. Syria, Asad commented, had been clear on how to start rebuilding relations. "We didn't say no," he said, "but we have to build from an absence of trust."

Asad: Door Open to Iranian Nuclear Deal

¶10. (S) Senator Cornyn commented the most dire threat to regional peace stemmed from Iran's nuclear aspirations. Syrian interests could well suffer if there were a conflict between Israel and Iran and possibly others. Asad replied no one could predict the course of a conflict; therefore, it was better to avoid one. The Bush Administration took a political approach to Iran instead of dealing with the nuclear issue in the context of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Under the NPT, Iran enjoys the right to enrich uranium, provided there is IAEA monitoring. Instead of trying to stop Iran's program, the international emphasis should shift to ensuring proper monitoring. Iran had accepted the principle of enriching uranium outside of its borders. Now the challenge was how to meet Iran's concern that shipping all of its LEU at once would risk not receiving any in return. Asad claimed Iran sought only to enrich its uranium to 20 percent, well below the 95 percent threshold necessary for weapons-grade material. If the international community agreed to divide Iran's shipments into four or five parts, Iran would be flexible, Asad argued. In the meantime, Israel had to forget about attacking Iran. Such a move would only encourage Iran to follow the path of India, Pakistan, and others in seeking a nuclear weapon. Syria opposed this outcome, but viewed the only solution was to recognize Iran's rights and demonstrate flexibility in foreign enrichment, Asad said.

¶11. (S) Later in the conversation, Senator Specter argued Iran appeared to be blocking a deal. Asad claimed Iranian diplomacy was now more flexible because the government was stronger and more confident after the 2009 elections. Noting he had shared this assessment with French President Sarkozy, Asad said he judged Iran to be looking for cooperative signs. Iran represented the most important country in the region, Asad assessed, ranking Turkey second and Syria third. The U.S. had troops in Afghanistan and needed better relations

with Iran. Specter agreed the enrichment issue could be solved; Russia had offered to enrich Iranian uranium several years ago, subject to international monitoring. Iran had answered yes, replied Asad, but the issue was how to proceed.

Iran's desire to divide the uranium shipments represented the only difference: if the West agreed, the issue would be solved. There was an open door; if the nuclear issue could be solved, the peace process would proceed more easily. But if conflict erupted, the regional context would become extremely complicated.

Discussion of Detained Amcits in Iran

DAMASCUS 00000008 005 OF 006

¶12. (S) Senator Klobuchar commented that she had supported Barak Obama because of his promise to advance a new approach to international relations. While there were no easy solutions in the region, the U.S. and Syria appeared to have overlapping interests in avoiding war and in ensuring a strong and stable Iraq. From the U.S. perspective, Syria might demonstrate as a goodwill gesture its interest in better relations by helping obtain the release of three American citizens -- Joshua Fattal, Shane Bauer and Sarah Shourd -- who apparently crossed into Iran while hiking in northeastern Iraq. Swiss officials had visited them, but they were isolated and the U.S. lacked information on their whereabouts and any pending charges.

¶13. (S) Asad replied he was unfamiliar with their case and requested that the Embassy send more information. Senator Specter interjected later in the conversation that the Embassy had delivered a letter to the MFA that week from the Secretary. Specter added he had personally raised the matter in Washington with Syrian Ambassador Imad Mustafa. The U.S. would view positively Syrian efforts to secure the three Americans' release, Specter said, comparing the case to the Iranian detention of UK sailors whom Syria helped to free. "We'll try our best," replied Asad, saying it would be necessary to ask about the legal aspects of the case. Specter clarified there had been no charges filed. It had started as a trespassing case, but U.S.-Iranian relations were so poor it was impossible to resolve.

Re-Opening DCS: Syria Awaiting U.S. Steps First

¶13. (S) Senator Klobuchar and Senator Enzi argued Syria might demonstrate good will by re-opening the Damascus Community School (DCS), whose closure had hurt not just American students, but also many foreigners and Syrians. Senator Enzi said his committee's purview on education created a personal interest in seeing the DCS re-opened; the school's closure represented a step away from moving towards positive relations. Asad replied he wanted to open Syria to the rest of the world. In September 2008, for example, the French Embassy opened a new international school. Asad explained he had ordered DCS's closure after a U.S. military attack on Syrian soil had killed seven innocent civilians in late October 2008. "We had to respond," he argued, saying the school's closure "was the only step we could take" in response to the Bush Administration. President Carter, Asad continued, had urged the reopening of DCS during his December 2008 visit. "I told Carter that we are ready," said Asad, who noted the Syrian government wanted to send positive signals to the Obama administration and had done so by re-opening the American Cultural Center (ACC).

¶14. (S) FM Muallim noted that only part of the American Language Center portion of ACC had been allowed to re-open. He argued that he and other Syrian officials had told State Department officials that steps by Syria to improve relations first required U.S. steps. "We can't move without a waiver

for Syrian Airlines," he argued, citing the threat to Syrian civilians posed a U.S. ban on the sale of civilian aircraft and spare parts. Asad noted that a good friend who ran a medical laboratory was similarly unable to import U.S. lab technology. The bigger issue, Asad said, was about bilateral relations. Syria's intent was to re-open the DCS. Asad said he trusted President Carter and supported President Obama. "We know he has other problems and priorities, but there must be U.S. steps," Asad insisted.

DAMASCUS 00000008 006 OF 006

¶15. (C) U.S. Participants:

CDA Charles Hunter
Senator Judd Gregg
Senator Evan Bayh
Senator Arlen Specter
Senator Michael Enzi
Senator John Cornyn
Senator Amy Klobuchar
Mr. Paul Grove, Clerk, Senate Appropriations Committee
Mr. Christopher Gahan, Staff Member, Senator Gregg's Office
Mr. Michael Pevzner, Staff Member, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence
Mr. Tom Sullivan, Staff Member, Senate Judiciary Committee
Mr. Christopher Bradish, Staff Member, Senator Specter's Office

¶16. (C) Syrian Participants:

President Bashar al-Asad
Foreign Minister Walid Muallim
Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad
Presidential Advisor for Media and Policy Affairs Bouthaina Shaaban
MFA America's Desk Director Dr. Muhammad Khafif

¶17. (SBU) Mr. Paul Grove of CODEL Gregg cleared on this cable.
HUNTER